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# The Transformational Haze: Crisis, Shadow Economies, and Global Civil War on the Venezuela-Colombia Border

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The Transformational Haze: Crisis, Shadow Economies, and Global Civil War on the Venezuela-Colombia Border

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A Master's Research Paper

Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the department of IDCE

And accepted on the recommendation of

Dr. Kenneth MacLean, Chief Instructor

## **Abstract**

### **The Transformational Haze: Crisis, Shadow Economies, and Global Civil War on the Venezuela-Colombia Border**

Sam Kirsch, Clark University 2019

This paper presents a counter-narrative to the current migration ‘crisis’ on the Venezuela-Colombia border. Its purpose is to highlight the geopolitical complexities of this event that are de-emphasized by media and neoliberal discourse. The frameworks of crisis narrative, shadow economies, and “global civil war” grants us the analytical lens that will allow us to peer further into the processes that have led to the Venezuelan migration. Through this lens, I will illuminate intricacies in the relationship between Colombia, Venezuela, and the West in a way that justifies the exploration of alternative interpretations to mainstream claims of socialism, tyranny, and intervention.

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this to my wonderful partner, Samantha Bryan, and the boundaries of her patience that I tested over and over again throughout the course of this project. I love you more everyday. Thank you for all your support.

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## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Migration and the Border.....	4
3. Crisis .....	7
4. Global Civil War .....	13
5. Shadow Economies: An Introduction .....	17
6. <i>La Violencia</i> .....	19
7. <i>Narcoterrorismo</i> and the Rebirth of the FARC .....	21
8. The Privatization of Violence .....	26
9. The Heirs to the Cartels .....	30
10. The FANB and Organized Crime in Venezuela .....	31
11. Corruption in the Venezuelan Government .....	35
12. Street Crime in Venezuela .....	38
13. Shadow Economies: An Analysis.....	41
14. Conclusion.....	48
15. Bibliography .....	51

## **INTRODUCTION**

Beginning in 2014, a steadily increasing number of Venezuelans began to leave Venezuela and enter Colombia. Five years later, that number is still increasing. For many Venezuelans, necessities have become increasingly unattainable. Food, fuel, medicine, electricity, employment, all are dwindling in supply. They find themselves in a position where, especially for the most vulnerable, their means of livelihood have ceased to exist, thus rendering them incapable of obtaining the crucial resources needed to survive, let alone thrive.

At the heart of this event lies a regime that has turned inwards. The Maduro administration has been channeling the country's remaining resources to the center and redistributing them vertically amongst the most elite. Since national sovereignty restricts direct international intervention, and President Maduro's despotism has governments, agencies, and administrations asking what to do, the international community is becoming increasingly concerned as their options to contain the migration diminish.

The influx of Venezuelans is straining Colombian infrastructure. Many Venezuelan migrants find themselves in precarious situations, many without access to food, water, and shelter. As we shall see, the media, as well as humanitarian agencies and NGOs, press that this is a crisis of Biblical proportions. They call for an intervention apparatus that is comprehensive, all-encompassing, and, I will argue, greatly overestimates the breadth of the problem. This paper is an examination of what the reason for this overestimation may be.

Worldwide, as many as 3 million Venezuelans are living outside of Venezuela. Approximately one million are in Colombia. Compared to the Syrian or the South Sudanese



migrations, events both deemed 'crises' through these same international channels, these numbers are significantly lower than two other events. Couple this with the displacement caused by the Colombian civil war, a displacement of approximately 6.1 million persons, and the current Venezuelan migration diminishes further. There are significant differences between the three other crises listed above and the Venezuelan migration. We will address these accordingly, but first we must ask: If the Venezuelan migration is not only smaller than both the Syrian and South Sudanese migrations as well as internal displacement in Colombia through which this new migration is moving, then why is it being called a crisis? What does this determination do? What kind of geopolitical movements does this create? What kind of doors does this open? What kinds of doors does this close? How does it direct attention? This then raises even further questions such as who gets to determine a crisis? How is it defined? Whose interests does it serve? This paper will provide a framework through which we will address these questions.

The US, the EU, the media, and the international community are promoting the idea that only national, regional, and international humanitarian intervention can contain and support the influx of Venezuelans into Colombia. I will argue that the issue is not so much that Colombia cannot handle the migrants, it is more that the international community is interested in having them be dependent upon state services as opposed to informal economies, informal economies that are connected with larger, what we will come to understand as, shadow economies that threaten neoliberal interests in this part of the world. This paper will argue that this movement to crisis may represent a neoliberal capitalization on a migration event that will

allow international regulation of a borderlands that has been historically resistant to formal state regulation.

We then ask, “Why has the border been historically resistant to formal state regulation?” Decades (or centuries, depending on your perspective) of internal conflict, combined with an expansive transnational indigenous borderland population, some of whom possess dual citizenship, has created a border culture with a deeply held knowledge of the almost-200 illegal pathways that span the 1400-kilometer border between Colombia and Venezuela. These pathways are used for purposes that range from access to food and medicine to the movement of weapons and narcotics. The entities who utilize these paths range from the local individual to the international corporation and comprise a spectrum of demographics containing guerillas, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers. These groups comprise this shadow economy.’ It is here that we will focus our attention.

We will be journeying through the current migration, its manifestations, its challenges, and the border that simultaneously divides the countries as it unites them. From there we will look at Janet Roitman (Roitman, 2014) to define our understanding of crisis and to make the connections between her analysis of the 2008 economic crisis and the correlations between the discourse surrounding that event and the focus of our investigation, the migration from Venezuela to Colombia. The second part of our theoretical framework will focus on Mark Duffield (Duffield, 2008). It will elaborate on how crisis fits into his larger framework of the international policies of containment of *non-insured* life. It will also connect the self-reliance practices the poor utilize to resist domination, and then the ways in which power returns to contain their efforts. To conclude the framework, we will briefly introduce Carolyn Nordstrom

(Nordstrom, 2000) and shadow economies for the purpose of providing the groundwork for the elaboration of Colombian and Venezuelan social, political, and cultural history that will exemplify the rationale for conceptualizing the interrelation between these myriad actors as being part of not only Nordstrom's framework for shadow economies, but also for Duffield's processes of containment and Roitman's analysis of crisis narratives. From there we will look at the political divides in Colombia that have led to nearly perpetual violent civil conflicts. We will engage with the legal, illegal, and paralegal groups that have developed as a result before turning our attention to organized crime in the Venezuela, in the government, and in the armed forces. We will then bring this information back around into Nordstrom's shadow economy framework to show how these different actors interact as a shadow economy not only with one another, but with the international shadow economy as a whole.

In the pages to come, I will lay out a counter-narrative through which I submit the idea that other interpretations of the migration are available, ones that do not involve crisis narratives. Additionally, the discussion of socialism, tyranny, and the need for humanitarian intervention will come to represent a narrowing of focus that is questionably refined. This paper will utilize the three frames of crisis narrative, shadow economy, and global civil war to generate a perspective that expands the analytic lens to encompass a wider spectrum thus establishing a much more complex picture.

## **MIGRATION AND THE BORDER**

Approximately 3 million Venezuelans have left Venezuela since 2014 (UNHCR, 2018). Hyperinflation, economic mismanagement, and a lack of food and medicine are forcing people to look for livelihood options elsewhere. For many Venezuelans, options are most appealing in neighboring Colombia. Somewhere between 600,000 and 1 million people have taken up at least temporary residence there. Some stay in border towns. Those with documentation have access to state services there, but access to documentation fluctuates and many move into the larger cities or continue through into Ecuador and Peru. ““More than a million people have migrated from Venezuela to Colombia in the last 15 months, of which 250,000 are returning Colombians and 819,000 are Venezuelans with the intent to stay,’ Felipe Munoz, the Colombian government’s director of border issues told journalists” (Cobb, 2018).

A variety of factors make Colombia a viable option, the porous nature of the border being the most important one. South American countries have cooperative documentation policies when it comes to internal migration. If you are a citizen of one South American country, going to another one is not a difficult process. Colombia is no exception. Therefore, on a state-level, the border is relatively easy to cross legally. However, access to appropriate documentation can be limited to Venezuelans due to bureaucratic quagmire, therefore the illegal passages are what make this border unique. These illegal paths, called *trochas*, exist for several reasons. One is that indigenous groups living on the border have utilized them to maintain a transnational community (El Pais, 2017). Another is that Colombians and Venezuelans living in border areas cross the border to take advantage of economic fluctuations and asymmetries (Dreier & Goodman, 2016). But the major use for the illegal paths has been the drug and weapons trade (Cragin & Hoffman, 2003). These almost 200 illegal paths created

through decades of illicit trade have not only provided clear-cut paths from one country to the other, but they have created a border culture that is aware of how to both use and traverse the paths physically and utilize them economically. The news publication *El País* did an exhaustive work on the Colombia-Venezuela border in 2017. A Colombian official, quoted in the report, says, “[The border] is a structure in which facilitates, by a state route, the trafficking of drugs, gasoline, food, and minerals, shared by three-armed corps: the Bolivarian National Armed Forces, the guerillas, and the paramilitaries” (El País, 2017).

In Colombia, state-reach is weak. Urban centers possess mostly effective state control, but the farther one gets from city centers, the more isolated centralized state power becomes (Marre, 2014). The Colombia-Venezuela borderlands are a place where symbols and signs, roles and relationships are deconstructed and then reconstructed. The porosity of the border allows migrants not only the ability to cross, but to gain access to the ability to earn money and support themselves and their families. They do this through a variety of mechanisms. First, government subsidies on food and fuel make for lucrative Colombian markets for Venezuelan products. In addition, as Venezuela’s economy continues to decline, people are smuggling whatever they can manage over the border. Second, copper piping, furniture, jewelry, illegally mined products, construction materials, railroad tracks, amongst many others, find themselves transported across the border, their passage facilitated by easily-bribed Venezuelan soldiers, Colombian guerillas and drug traffickers. Colombian vendors are more than happy to accommodate the migrants and their wares. Third, the informal economy that exists in the border areas offers opportunities for those who cannot access official documentation. Migrants can earn money in a spectrum of ways ranging from selling hair or candies in the street to

construction and infrastructure jobs, to prostitution, drug trafficking, drug production, and extortion (El Pais, 2017).

On the international stage, the Colombian government receives praise for their progressive immigration practices in keeping the border open for Venezuelan migrants, but the fact of the matter, as we will see, is that the Colombian government is incapable of policing the border because the border is already policed. This is illustrated well when President Maduro closed the border in 2015 as a response to 3 border guards being killed, allegedly by traffickers. He declares a state of emergency in 10 municipalities, deploys 5000 more troops, and closes the border indefinitely. (Ciurlizza & Gunson, 2015) This unilateral shutdown by the Venezuelan government left the Colombian army on the other side with the task of policing the border by themselves. Communication between both sides also collapsed. In addition to drastically increasing their control over the border, the Venezuelan military now maintains a border monopoly that allows them to squeeze out smaller groups and then consolidate power into the larger ones thus creating even more powerful groups as a result (El Pais, 2017).

Illicit organizations are deeply embedded not only in the Colombian government and military, but in international corporate interests as well. These entities manipulate policy to create the jurisdictional discontinuities that facilitate their entrepreneurial interests. These relationships, coupled with the daily interactions that locals have with the black markets, indicate the existence of a powerful 'shadow economy' that exists on the Colombia-Venezuela border (Cragin & Hoffman, 2003).

## **CRISIS**

When it comes to the migration, the media is alive with claims of a “crisis” (Baddour, 2018) (Cobb, 2018) (Forero, 2018) (Idler, 2017) (BBC News, 2018) (Reuters, 2018). This “exodus” (Ramsey & Sanchez-Garzoli, 2018), these “throngs of people” (Ciurlizza & Gunson, 2015) whose plight increases daily are broadcast by most major news sources framed in the language of crisis. Images of the Simon de Bolivar Bridge in Cucuta in the Norte de Santander, the major border crossing, show tens of thousands of people clamoring to cross the bridge daily (Watson, 2018). There are images of fatherless families in the streets sleeping on their luggage. There are images of Venezuelans holding bags of worthless bolivars echoing Weimar Germans carting around barrels of deutschmarks. There are warnings against drug and human traffickers, concerns for child welfare, and depictions of clinics and hospitals in border areas overrun with Venezuelans seeking care (UNHCR, 2018). To compound this, the international organizations are projecting almost 4 million Venezuelans in Colombia by the end of 2021, and they also expect the Venezuelan ‘crisis’ to reach “Syria 2014 numbers” (Cobb, 2018)” Publications abound call for an international reaction. “This should extend not only to mobilizing international financial resources but also to coordinated and complementary immigration infrastructure and screening procedures, cooperative mapping of country needs and capabilities of governments and civil society, burden-sharing for migrant relocation, and intelligence- and information-sharing among affected countries,” says Olin Wethington (2018).

Eleven countries met in Quito in 2018 and agreed upon conditions for an international response to the migration crisis. Among the conditions were regular status and asylum, documentation, humanitarian aid, data collection, anti-gender-based-violence, anti-trafficking,

anti-xenophobia, and an increase in international support. Regional initiatives consist of greater interaction between international organizations and regional migration authorities, ombudsmen, and NGOs. The aim here is to increase collaboration and practice-sharing, to promote the rights of Venezuelan migrants, and to help them to access services (UNHCR, 2018).

According to Geoff Ramsey of the Washington Office on Latin America, suffering from post-conflict challenges, the politicization of the Venezuelan crisis, and the lack of state presence outside of urban centers, the Colombian government has struggled to meet the demands of the migration event. As far as recommendations for forces external to Colombia, the call is for the US to lift economic sanctions. Colombia must reaffirm the Cartagena Declaration, he says, therefore committing to the right to asylum, non-refoulement, and durable solutions. The US and the international community needs to affirm and assure support and that regional governments must be sensitive to territory, authority, and culture of indigenous groups. Additionally, the US would do well to create a special asylum status for Venezuelans. (Ramsey & Sanchez-Garzoli, 2018)

Amidst this fervor over the crisis, surprisingly quiet is the conversation about what has led to the porousness of the border. I put forward the reason for this silence is that crisis narratives and the fevers they inflame allow not only journalists, scholars, and policy makers the tools to justify their interpretations of history as “fact,” but they also allow power structures to control narratives through what gets published and what does not.

In her book, *Anti-Crisis*, Janet Roitman lays out the argument that current “crisis” narratives operate in such abundance because the conceptualization of ‘crisis’ has shifted.



Anchoring her work in an examination of the 2008 financial crisis, she explores the ways economists, journalists, and news and government agencies utilized the term 'crisis' to promote their own narratives and view-points in a way that places the narrator outside of history. She cites the example rooted in the 2008 crash: "Indignation over the fact that taxpayers financed the massive translation of private debt into public debt, via a massive devaluation or expropriation of wealth, lost its political force by replicating the crisis judgment and embarking without hesitation or modesty on the relentless search for deviance from the sure ground of true value and the straight path of uncorrupted history" (Roitman, 2014, p. 56). The framing of my argument in this paper follows this example: crisis narratives regarding the Venezuelan migration in Colombia seek to dispel conversations regarding the implications of US and neoliberal policy and their role in the destabilization of the region in a way that echoes Roitman's critique of the 2008 economic crash.

Roitman elaborates on this point. Historically, crisis has been used to describe a turbulent crossroads through which intersecting entities become forever changed, a dialectic. Roitman argues that this is no longer the case, that crisis has taken on a different presentation. She says that claims to crisis allow narrators to position themselves, self-referentially, outside of history, when, in fact, they are applying their own determinations as to what time *is*, what is history *is*, how time is then divided into history, and vice versa, to statements they believe to be first-order observations, as well as implying conceptions of how they believe world *should* be. For this reason, Roitman believes that claims to crisis are inherently political, they promote agendas. "Crisis is the unexamined point of departure for narration. It is a blind spot for the production of knowledge about what constitutes historical significance and about what

constitutes social or historical meaning.... (It) implies that crisis is not an event that occurs in a given context, but that it, in itself, is an experience of historical time.” (Roitman, 2014, p. 66). “It is a logical observation that generates meaning in a self-referential system, or a non-locus from which to signify contingency and paradox. And the judgment of crisis is necessarily a post-hoc interrogation: what went wrong? Crisis is posited as an *a priori*; the grounds for crisis are neither questioned nor made explicit.” (Roitman, 2014, p. 10). In other words, the narrator fashions a construction of the world in their own image and then applies the concept of crisis to it. This application always comes after the fact and, driven by hindsight, the narrator is able to make statements about time, space, history, morality, and the meanings inherent in a chronology of events.

A brief comparison between displacements in Syria, Colombia, and Venezuela will further illustrate the cornerstone for questioning the discursive use of ‘crisis’ in the Venezuelan displacement. So far, approximately 3 million Venezuelans have left. That is about 7% of their population. Comparatively, Syria, currently, has 5.1 million people who have left the country, and another 6.5 million remain internally displaced (UNHCR, 2018). In addition, as a result of their 50-plus year internal conflict, Colombia has approximately 6.5 million internally displaced people, as well as about 4 million Colombians who left Colombia to seek refuge in Venezuela (International Displacement Monitoring Center, 2019). As we can see, the Venezuelan ‘crisis’, although still a situation to be taken seriously, is surprisingly smaller in scope than both an event considered a crisis and an event that is not considered a crisis.

There are other conditions that separate Venezuela from both Colombian displacement as well as Syrian displacement. The first is a lack of internal conflict. Venezuela is a violent

place. It has one of the highest homicide rates in South America. There is violent political repression. Protesters are killed by security forces. There are non-state and para-state groups that vie for control over the monopoly on violence, but they operate mostly with state approval, and Venezuela is not an active combat zone, unlike Syria and Colombia. Although Syria and Colombia do differ in the ways their conflicts play out, there are significant troop deployments, armed engagements, long-range artillery bombardments, air strikes, and civilian casualties. Second only to Afghanistan, Colombia has the highest concentration of land mines in the world. In no way am I downplaying the experiences of Venezuelans or insinuating a hierarchy of suffering, but I argue that migration due to direct military conflict and migration due to hyperinflation, government repression, and lack of food and medicine create different social landscapes and therefore weaken the comparison.

So, if the Venezuelan displacement, quantitatively, falls short of a displacement that has been described as a 'crisis' and also falls short of a displacement that is not only not considered a crisis, but is happening in the same geographic location as the Venezuelan migration, then what purpose does branding the Venezuelan migration as a 'crisis' serve? The next step to answering this question is to show the interconnections between state, para-state, and non-state actors in both Colombia and Venezuela and how they created a shadow economy that is deeply entrenched in licit market activities. Addressing the root causes not only of the Venezuelan migration but of the social processes that create and maintain the porosity of the border would illuminate unfavorable aspects of neoliberal policies and, in the form of cocaine, commodity fetishism that has created and maintained cultures of violence, repression, and displacement in Colombia since the 1970's. Additionally, it would highlight the failures of the

War on Drugs and draw attention to the ways in which US military support exacerbated the conflict and strengthened parastate and non-state groups on the border who facilitate the migration as well as the illegal border economy. To do this, we will situate these events in front of the backdrop of the “global civil war.”

### **GLOBAL CIVIL WAR**

It has been shown that migration and displacement in the contemporary world stem from social conditions directly tied to neoliberal policies. Wise and Covarrubias state that there are five global economic movements and then three social movements that cause people from underdeveloped countries to leave their homes in search of refuge or employment. They write,

“After the end of the so-called Golden Age of Capitalism, the crisis of accumulation and the resulting fall in profitability experienced by the world capitalist system throughout the 1970s led the core or developed countries, with the United States at the forefront, to implement a strategy for capitalist restructuring at a world scale centered on five supplementary mechanisms: mundialization, neo-liberalization, financialization, militarization, and the devalorization of labor.... In peripheral or underdeveloped countries, the implementation of this combined strategy has resulted in three revealing

movements: (1) the dismantling of the national accumulation pattern and outward reorientation, leading to the reduction and re-articulation of the productive apparatus, the contraction of its internal market, the destruction of subsistence and social security systems, and the expansion of social inequality; and (2) the generation of a surplus-population due to the liberalization of large contingents of their means of production and subsistence, which trigger unemployment and underemployment streaks and an increase in poverty and misery, in addition to demonstrations of protest, resistance and rebellion. This situation of social instability leads to state repression, violence, illicit activities and social insecurity; and (3) the emergence of forced migration. With the destruction of production and subsistence means, millions of workers and their families are driven to abandon their places of origin to emigrate elsewhere within their country or to developed countries demanding cheap labor.” (Wise & Covarubbias, 2011, pp. 58-59)

These concepts do not apply entirely to the Venezuelan migration nor to the Colombian conflicts, but they are represented in the histories of both of these countries and they help to frame the ways in which migration events can be conceptualized. Both Colombia and Venezuela have encountered aspects of structural adjustment and neoliberalism but, for Colombians, their historical links to the US regarding Panama, communism, and drugs, and, for Venezuelans, their rich oil reserves, has tailored the impacts of neoliberal policies to each country individually. However, economic decisions made within Venezuela contribute directly to the movement of people out of the country. These decisions are not the direct result of neoliberalism and

development in the way described by Wise and Covarrubias, but they are linked to development in the ways in which under- and undeveloped countries must circumvent licit institutions in order to maintain power.

Mark Duffield raises attention to the practices of containment and “liberal problematic of security” which “... prioritizes the security of people rather than states and, as such is often seen as a progressive turn in international relations” (Duffield, 2008, p. 145). For Duffield, however, this turn does not hold as much positivity as it presents. It is, in fact, the way in which the Global North builds barriers to keep out the poor as well as to develop an internal social structure to integrate those who do manage to cross the barrier as rapidly as possible thus dispelling the ‘threat’ to internal security. Duffield shows that, through development, the Global North takes as its object the increasing security over life that he refers to as “insured.” Locating his argument within the framework of biopolitics, Duffield creates a duality of “insured vs. non-insured” life. Insured life is the ‘good life’, a consistent existence in the Global North where “critical infrastructure” provides citizens with that which they need to maximize their self-potential. Non-insured life, on the other hand, exists to provide for insured life and is responsible for their own self-reliance. That self-reliance, however, often occurs in the forms of informal, black, and shadow economies. For Duffield, the constant threat of the ingenuity of the poor to overcome or sidestep self-reliance restrictions is the mechanism through which the Global North engages “global civil war” against the poor on a perpetual basis.

Now, Duffield’s examples are sited often in the EU, UK, the Middle East, and in Asia. In order to bring this to our hemisphere, we must follow him into his discussion of ‘new war’ and how humanitarian aid plays a role in its conceptualization. During the Cold War-era, “Civil war

was reinterpreted in terms of irrationality, the breakdown of order, deliberate violations of human rights, the growth of criminality and the erosion of aggregate self-reliance” (Duffield, 2008, p. 157). Internal conflict in Colombia is rooted in these proxy wars. As we will see, the struggle between the FARC and the Colombian government from the 1960’s to the 1980’s became axiomatic of how the US wanted superpower relations to play out. They would support liberal government, and the Soviets would support the communists and the local groups would fight it out.

According to Duffield, during the Cold War, political violence was acceptable in the Global South, but after the fall of the Soviet Union, international response to rebel groups and the role of humanitarian organizations shifted. Duffield describes this shift as possessing two modalities of ‘soft power’. The first is *negotiated access*. The UN would “secure agreement between the warring parties on the humanitarian terms and conditions whereby civilians could be accessed.... Apart from its fragility, intrinsic to negotiated access was the implicit recognition conferred on rebels and other non-state political actor” (Duffield, 2008, pp. 159-160). The second modality is the shift to *integrated mission* which “represents a relative closure of political space. Whereas humanitarian operations had recognized oppositional non-state actors as the price of access, the integrated mission closes ranks around support for the peace accord” (Duffield, 2008, pp. 159-160). In shifting from negotiated access to implicit mission, NGOs were capable of repositioning themselves as gatekeepers to restricted means of self-reliance. By no longer recognizing rebel groups as legitimate belligerents, development organizations can circumvent the need for diplomacy and the potential difficulties diplomacy brings. Therefore, mass consumer society creates the poor. Development fosters self-reliance. Poor create new

forms self-reliance. Development disapproves. It tries to contain it. To do so, it delegitimizes political violence and redistributes that focus onto “defensive development”. Poverty is then taken as the object and credited with the genesis of violence, terrorism, and conflict.

Development agencies and NGO’s are then positioned strategically to create a “civilian technology of counterinsurgency” (Duffield, 2008, p. 158). This humanitarian counterinsurgency seeks to reinforce the ‘ban on the movement on non-insured life’ as well as to destabilize the shadow economies that develop when people are forced to rely entirely on themselves. I posit that this one aspect of what is occurring on the Colombia-Venezuela border. Rebel groups and renegade governments have become unpredictable and neoliberal organizations are intervening to contain both them and the displacement of non-insured life. To substantiate this claim, let us look at Carolyn Nordstrom’s theories of shadow economies and how they apply to Colombia, Venezuela, and the borderlands.

### **SHADOW ECONOMIES: AN INTRODUCTION**

Drug trafficking is a major industry in Colombia. The cartels of the 1970’s and 1980’s became powerfully violent entities that were capable of making substantial campaign contributions that continue to haunt politicians years after the cartel’s public demise in the early 1990’s. Following the *narcoterrorismo*-era, restructured drug trafficking organizations would ingratiate themselves with left-wing guerilla groups and right-wing paramilitaries. This consolidation of control of the drug production and distribution was facilitated by their interconnection with landowners, ranchers, and corporate and political elites. The area in which



these groups operated was along the border. As previously stated, state reach is weak.

Borderlands are infamous for being areas where lawlessness is commonplace, especially when they are comprised of thick rainforests, marshlands, and rivers. However, even in the towns and cities, illicit trade is all around.

Carolyn Nordstrom speaks of these 'shadow economies' as "... vast extra-state networks that expand across war and peace, and across all the world's countries" (Nordstrom, 2000, p. 36). They operate on a variety of scales, from the local to the international. They can be as simple as a single person smuggling fuel over the border on a motorcycle to earn some extra money to massive criminal networks involving the movement of highly sophisticated technology. She utilizes the term 'extra-state' to draw attention to the condition that these shadow economies are not separate from states, but they operate through and around them. The lines between state and non-state become so blurred that the need to create a third criteria is required, that of the extra-state actor, an organization capable of transcending traditional networks. It is important to frame the Venezuelan migration in terms of its relation to the pre-existing shadow economy that exists between Colombia, Venezuela, and international markets.

However, before we do this, we must recognize that Nordstrom is locating her field work in Angola and central Africa. As with Duffield we must transpose the argument into our area of operations across oceans and back to South America. Fifteen years of research has gone into Nordstrom's study of shadow economies and how they operate. She finds herself integrated with armed rebel groups in Angola as they fight for control of the country in the 1990's. Isolated as an illegal non-combatant group, the rebels are unable to access international

supply markets. Desperate for weapons, transportation, and communication equipment, they resort to black market activities: drugs, weapons, and illegal mining. Nordstrom tracks, to the best of her ability, the complex networks through which rebel groups, seemingly exempt from international trade, manage to procure equipment of such sophistication that it allows them to engage state entities in even-handed combat. A network both separate from and deeply connected to one such as whom Nordstrom's Angolan rebels aligned exists in Venezuela, Colombia, and the borderlands. Let us now move to our discussion of organized crime on the border.

### **LA VIOLENCIA**

Colombia has a history to violence and turmoil. Colonized by the Spanish in 1499, it declared its independence from Spain in 1810. Simon de Bolivar led rebellious troops to victory at the Battle of Boyaca, sending the Spaniards out of power (Library of Congress Federal Research Division, 2007). However, the Colombian elites who replaced the Spanish were cut from a very similar aristocratic cloth and class stratification becomes integrated into post-Colonial society (Leech, 2011).

Gran Colombia, comprised of what would become Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama, is created. Bolivar becomes the first president. General Francisco de Paula Santander is the Vice President. The eventual rift between the two sets in motion the Colombian political divide. Bolivar supporters are authoritarian, aligned with the Church, and are pro-slavery. Santander supporters are decentralized, anti-clerical, and promote voting rights. These divisions

will factor in to Colombia's internal conflicts. Venezuela and Ecuador secede in 1830. Created then is the Republic of New Granada with Santander as President (1832-1837). Colombia becomes The Republic of Colombia in 1898. (Library of Congress Federal Research Division, 2007).

Between 1850 and 1899, there are seven separate civil wars as a result of the conflict between the Conservatives and the Liberals, the followers of Bolivar versus the followers of Santander. A period of tension known as the Regeneration Period, which lasts from 1878-1900, culminates in the War of a Thousand days. Beginning in 1899 and ending in 1902, the war would claim over 100,000 lives and foment nearly inexorable political tensions. These warring parties are part of the social elite, fighting each other for prestige and power. Caught in the conflagration are the rural peasants who are callously mistreated, neglected, or utilized strategically by both sides (Library of Congress Federal Research Division, 2007).

Peace is achieved in 1902. With clandestine US assistance, Panama secedes in 1903. Again, we see a period of increasing political tensions erupting into violence. On April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1948, popular Liberal leader Jorge Elcer Gaitan is assassinated. The lower-class Liberals in Bogota, The Bogetazo, rise up in response. They are met with resistance from the Conservatives. This violence then spreads to the other major cities. Soon, fighting between the left and the right has begun all over the country. This period of violence, known simply as *La Violencia*, will last until 1948. Liberal and Conservative elites, concerned that the continued fighting would ignite a peasant uprising, banded together to create the National Front, a military organization for the purpose of extinguishing the violence before a peasant rebellion could begin (Leech, 2011).

As *La Violencia* progressed, the fighting affected the peasantry to a greater and greater extent. To contend with this, they began to arm themselves. These groups presented a threat to Colombian status quo that was significant enough to warrant a conjoined, armed response. Support of the peasants by the Colombian Communist party alarmed the US and, assisted by US funds, the National Front conducted what was intended to be a final assault on the rebels. However, all 48 rebels managed to escape. Where they would wind up would create the traditional homes of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), Colombia's longest-operating left-wing guerilla groups (Leech, 2011).

### **NARCOTERRORISMO AND THE REBIRTH OF THE FARC**

Some argue that *La Violencia* concluded with this event in 1958 (Leech, 2011), yet others feel that the period of instability beginning in 1948 did not end until 1974 citing the increasing guerrilla war fought between the Colombian government and the guerilla groups in the countryside, (Cragin & Hoffman, 2003). That peace, however, would be short lived. During the 1970's, Colombian cocaine became a commodity in the international, but primarily US, drug markets. Most of the world's cocaine is produced in Colombia. 90% of US cocaine comes from Colombia. The Cali and Medellin Cartels, who would control production and distribution from the late 1970's until the early-to-mid 1990's, gained their infamy in this time. The Medellin Cartel, led by Pablo Escobar, would make a name for itself through its use of intense violence. The cartel ended in 1994 with the death of Pablo Escobar by government forces assisted by the CIA.

The Cali cartel, on the other hand, was calculated and patient. It decided to forgo bloodshed and violence for a more economically stable business model. Rather than control through force, it utilized political contributions. This allowed the cartel to operate longer and with less violence than Medellin. The cartel was eventually dissolved in the mid to late 1990's. It has taken on several incarnations since then, notably the Norte de Valle cartel, as those who participate in the drug trade can find new employment. Part of the problem is that the networks for production and distribution remain unchanged. They simply change hands.

When the cartels dissolved, the gap was then filled in by the FARC. Created in the countryside during *La Violencia*, the ideologically-motivated left-wing guerilla group interested in Guevara-style peasant uprising, began its foray into drug trafficking in earnest in the early 1990's. Since its inception in 1964 until the early 1980's, it fought the Colombian government for in the name of overthrowing urban oppression. Its operations were financed by extortion and kidnapping. Then, in the early 1980's, the geographic locations in which the FARC conducted its operations began to produced cocaine. Integration between the FARC and the drug traffickers was initially limited, but interconnection between the two parties increased over time. When the cartels collapsed, the FARC was positioned to easily step in and control the production and distribution, using it to finance their operations (Library of Congress Federal Research Division, 2007).

As FARC increased its operations into drug trafficking, they became bolder. In 1982, the FARC came to the negotiating table for the first time. Promises of political inclusion facilitated the ceasefire and the FARC established a political branch known as the Union Patrotica, or UP. Between 1986 and 1990, somewhere between 2,000 and 4,000 members of the UP were

assassinated by right-wing paramilitary groups. The catastrophe of the UP experiment permanently damaged trust in the Colombian government and caused them to restructure in a way that increased violence inside of Colombia (Lee, 2012).

The period between 1994 and 1998 saw a spike in FARC-led violence. Several factors played into this. The first is that the failure of the UP project convinced the FARC that negotiation was futile, the Colombian government only wanted their destruction, and that they should reorganize and rearm accordingly. The second is that legal, semi-legal, and illegal paramilitary groups began to appear, again. These groups were created by a need for wealthy landowners and other elites to protect themselves against being kidnapped by guerilla groups. Kidnapping the wealthy is a significant source of income for both the FARC and the ELN. A third is that the arms race between the FARC and the paramilitaries resulted in the acquisition and use of increasingly deadly weaponry (Marre, 2014). Cragin and Hoffman observe that, “The US aid package is widely interpreted in Colombia as a state-to-state arms transfer. Because FARC competes with the Colombian security forces for military supremacy, it responded to this state-to-state transfer by purchasing more weapons itself. This stimulated, in turn, an increase in AUC activities to counter FARC, resulting in its own increase in arms procurement (Cragin & Hoffman, 2003, p. 42).”

As the FARC step up their operations in the mid-to-late 1990's, they begin to meet increased resistance. Between the paramilitaries, the Colombian army, and the influx of weaponry stemming from the 1.3 billion-dollar Plan Colombia, the FARC is almost halved by the 2003. However, a couple of movements happen here. The first is that a round of ill-advised peace negotiations creates a demilitarized zone in Colombia the size of Switzerland. This allows

the FARC to hole up and reorganize. The second is that the Plan Colombia is an abject failure. The increase of violence and the lack of decrease in drug production implies that the US aid initiative was wholly ineffective and increased instability. The third movement is that the FARC, whose numbers are now significantly decreased, shifts from large-scale operations to smaller, daily attacks. In addition, they have laid so many landmines that Colombia is second only to Afghanistan in the number of active landmines existing in the country currently.

Not only did Plan Colombia cause an arms race, it also re-entrenched anti-state and anti-US sentiments. The aerial spraying of coca crops was ineffective, as it resulted in cultivators redoubling efforts, and it also destroyed peasant's cash and subsistence crops. If the goal was to turn the rural support against the FARC, evidence shows that this was not the outcome. However, urban resistance towards the FARC has turned against them as a result of the increased violence (Marre, 2014).

Currently, another round of peace negotiations is ending. Beginning in the Santos administration in 2012, these appear to be the most successful talks to date. Among the issues brought to the table are land reform, demobilization/transitional Justice/political participation, drug trafficking, disarmament, and restitution for conflict victims (Marre, 2014). A change in administration in 2018 raised concerns that Duque would not be as willing to follow in the footsteps of his predecessor, but that does not appear to be the case. The FARC is expected to demobilize, yet, for several reasons, the citizens remain skeptical that the violence will stop.

One of the reasons for the lack of faith is that the ELN, the second major guerilla group in Colombia, remains active. The ELN began around the same time as the FARC, 1964. Although grounded in Marxist ideology, more Liberation theology is incorporated into their construction.

Many of the original members came from the leftist movements in the Churches and universities. The ELN's creation was guided by radical Catholics and Marxist academics whereas the FARC is rooted in peasant rebellion. They followed closer to the Havana school of Marxist revolution, where the FARC is Moscow (Rabasa & Chalk, 2001).

The ELN is funded mostly through kidnapping and extortion. Like the FARC, they participate in the kidnapping and ransoming of wealthy landowners and ranchers. They also participate in economic and infrastructure sabotage. They are feared by the oil companies whose operations are in areas often controlled by the ELN. The guerrillas then will blow up pipelines, interrupt shipping, or hold crews hostage for ransom (Rabasa & Chalk, 2001).

The ELN did not participate in the drug trade in the same way that the FARC did. They facilitate it to some extent. Many of the cocaine producers pay the ELN a tithe but the ELN is not directly involved. The ELN was hard hit by the Colombian military in the 1960's. By the end of the decade, more than half of their leadership had been captured or killed. They were to re-emerge in the 1980's by Father Manuel Perez, the guerilla priest. He united ELN factions through funds extorted from the multinational oil companies. The organization grew from 800 fighters in 1986 to 3000 in 1996, and then to 3-5000 by 2000 (Rabasa & Chalk, 2001, p. 30).

As we can see, there has been an increase in ELN activity over the past three decades. They refuse to come to the bargaining table citing lack of trust in the government. There are rumors currently that they may be considering negotiations, but rumblings of talks are one of the ways that these groups relieve some of the government and paramilitary pressure. Here is it important to acknowledge Duffield and the policies of counterinsurgency and containment. The failures of the peace negotiations between the FARC, the ELN, and the Colombian



government as well as the failure of Plan Colombia, coupled with the historical interest that the US has in Colombian affairs, could play a role in the mobilization of humanitarian apparatus. I acknowledge that what is happening on the border is a multifaceted and complex situation with many moving parts. However, taking into consideration the ways in which humanitarianism seeks to control populations as well as to delegitimize political violence, what is happening on the Colombia-Venezuela border fits into the frameworks described above. By taking over control of who gets to go where and why, and who has access to services and who does not, humanitarian organizations serve to circumvent both informal and illicit markets, contain the movement of “non-insured” life, and quell political violence without having to go through diplomatic pathways.

### **THE PRIVATIZATION OF VIOLENCE**

One of the other main reasons for the lack of faith in successful disarmament lies with the aftermath of the 2006 demobilization of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, the AUC. The AUC is a loose confederation of 7 paramilitary organizations led by the Castano brothers, brought together to protect right-wing organizations from guerilla incursion. They were the largest and most infamous of the paramilitaries. They are linked to the drug traffickers and to wealthy landowners and, as a result of this, possess some level of police support. Even though they were disbanded in 2006, dissident elements resisted demobilization and the AUC was considered a terrorist organization until 2011.. This is one of avenues through which faith in the peace process is lost (Grajales, 2017).

In July 2003, negotiations with Uribe began. They were concluded by 2006. 30,150 troops, 17,000 weapons, 117 vehicles, 3 helicopters, 59 urban properties, and 24,000 hectares of land were turned over to the government. The AUC asked for minimal-to-no prison time, they would provide no details on political and economic issues as well as anything relating to drug trafficking, they would retain all of their financial assets, and they would be shielded against extradition to the United States. The government accepted most of the AUC's demands. (Library of Congress Federal Research Division, 2007). The underlying issue exemplified here, and as well as when the EPL disarmed in 1994, about 10% of the most dedicated fighters declined to demobilize, packed up their weapons, and went back into the jungles to continue their violent operations. The EPL formed Los Pelusos, and the AUC dissidents created the loose organization known as *Bandas Criminales*, or BACRIM (InSight Crime, 2018).

It has been argued that the reason most of the AUC's demands were met was because of former President Uribe's connections to them and their creations. Uribe and his family are wealthy landowners who were affected by the encroaching rural violence. When Uribe was governor of Antioquia, he advocated for the establishment of Convivir, a government program promoted by a new Minister of Defense who advocated to the necessity of paramilitarism to bring rural insurgency under state control through the establishment of a government organization that would regulate the private security firms, thus creating "a network of legal paramilitary organizations controlled by the army (p.34)." Many other ministries rejected the idea, citing that when they tried this in the early 1980's the paramilitaries got involved in drug trafficking, yet the program was still established, and the predictions were correct. Convivir was intrical in linking corporate interests, the state, and the military in a way that allowed for

private security firms to elevate their role to that of counterinsurgency. This is a telling example of the ways in which wealthy elites, paramilitaries, and politicians are interconnected (Grajales, 2017). It also serves to link us back to how shadow economies and self-reliance encapsulate a variety of licit and illicit political and economic actors.

Paramilitarism and the privatization of violence in Colombia is a complex concept. It should be conceptualized as a process, not as an organization. The groups are amorphous, their constructions are dynamic. They shift in and out of legality. Some groups are legal, some of them are semi-legal, and some of them are illegal. The determinations as to which ones fall into which categories at which times are fluid and subjective. They vary in size, construction, intention, and armament. Perez states,

“They are linked early to the drug trafficking networks and their main organization such as the Medellin cartel, transforming into what is called the “transnational criminal actor” within the new history of international relations. They developed counterinsurgency tasks, of dirty war, with the goal of perpetuating class relations on the country’s internal border, establishing as a military objective the political organizations of the left such as the UP Patriotic Union, human rights defenders, trade union leaders, social, student, peasants, and the civil and defenseless populations... The AUC was the result of a long history of privatization of violence in the country, articulating itself as an expansive political and military entity, of parastatal and transnational character, possessing a counterinsurgent, anti-Communist discourse. Its operation was

heterogeneous and federative, with important autonomy of its regional Blocks.

In its period of greatest boom (1999-2002) its actions were mobilized by internal and external interests linked to the drug business and regional and national elites, who saw them as a force capable of violently resolving class conflict, sealing the status quo, that of the domination and eliminating by means of the dirty war the social organizations, union leaders, and political left (Perez, 2016)."

The paramilitary groups effectively close the gap where the state and the army cannot reach. Although they do operate with varying degrees of legality, their connections to official state actors as well as their semi-legal and illegal connections to wealthy elites, many of whom shuffle between private and government institutions, compromises their ability to operate with full state sanction. Officially. Unofficially, they provide, according to Grajales, a *status-quo based violence* that reinforces elite ideology, an ideology that penetrates state organizations, therefore promoting state interests (Grajales, 2017). This also engages assertion that the state has lost control over the monopoly of violence. An argument can be made that the military has indeed lost control of the paramilitary's use of force, thus the state is losing control of the use of force however through both the Convivir program and the development of the AUC, an argument could be made that border policing has less to do with stopping the movement and securing the border, and more to do with controlling illicit trade and the monopoly of violence (Rabasa & Chalk, 2001).

## **THE HEIRS TO THE CARTELS**

When the cartels dissolved, three things happened. The first is that the FARC took over most of the production and distribution. The second is that what was left of the cartels factionalized and then restructured in the Norte de Valle cartel. This cartel existed until about 2011 when, through imprisonment and execution, it lost its leadership. This group then factionalized further into Los Urabenos and Los Rastrojos. Los Urabenos were effectively demobilized in 2017, but dissident elements have created The Clan de Golfo, or The Gulf Clan and their activities continue. These groups will be important later in our discussion of the border. The third is the demobilization of the AUC caused those elements within the AUC connected to drug trafficking to seek employment with their business associates and thus dissident BACRIM elements have been absorbed into drug trafficking organizations (InSight Crime, 2018).

Drug trafficking is a major industry in these isolated border regions. In areas where state reach is weak, illegal activities thrive, but not just for the profits. For many of the region's poor, the drug trade provides employment and economic security where agricultural subsistence has been affected by corporate agriculture, international finance, and urban elites. People can earn a living working for illegal organizations in many of the same ways that legal organizations offer. This sustains those on the fringes. Los Pelusos, Los Rastrojos, and El Clan de Golfo are the major groups who operate on the border. They work with permission from the FARC and the ELN. They lack ideological underpinnings. They are entirely in it for business. Their membership is a maze of interconnections between former guerilla fighters, members of the Medellin and Norte de Valle Cali cartels, and AUC-turned-BACRIM dissidents. This network is then facilitated by the

Bolivarian Armed Forces, the FANB, whose Cartel of the Suns facilitates the connection of their products to greater international markets. Here we see the fusing of a series of groups that span the full spectrum of legality. From Colombian paramilitaries to the Venezuelan government, from freedom fighters to agricultural elites, the interests of economic and political entities converges in a place in the world where “self-reliance” has created a shadow economy that has proved lucrative for just about every political actor about which one could think.

### **THE FANB AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN VENEZUELA**

Historically linked to Venezuelan politics and state-building dating back to President Jose Antonio Perez (1830-1835), the Bolivarian Armed Forces (Las Fuerza Armadas Nacional de Bolivar, the FANB), have been highly influential in politics. Venezuela has had military dictatorships for the period ranging 1899-1945. A formal military academy was constructed in 1910. Soldiers were revered and respected as important members of society. Hugo Chavez himself is a product of the 1971 Plan Andres Bello that established a new military school promoting high academic and military standards for those enrolled. When Chavez was elected in 1998, he appointed officers throughout his administration. After the 2002 failed coup, Chavez enacted two rounds of legislation, one in 2002, the other in 2005, that even further bound the FANB to the state. At this point, the National Armed Forces became the Bolivarian National Armed Forces to tie their allegiance to Chavismo (Fonseca, Polga-Hecimovich, & Trinkunas, 2016).

The FANB is responsible for airport, and port security (globalsecurity.org, n.d.). They also have jurisdiction over the border. State reach is also weak in Venezuela. As a result of this, the border area has been taken over by the FANB. Being an official state entity, they have access to resources that the other illegal groups on the border do not. One of these resources is the access to legitimate state processes. They use this access as leverage against other illegal groups. The FANB has also been given control of the oil production and food importation industries. Combine these levels of oversight with interconnection with members of the Venezuelan government and illegal groups in Colombia and large-scale criminal activities can be perpetrated. (Dreier & Goodman, 2016)

The first order of illegal business is the drug trade. Within the high command of the FANB is an organization referred to as The Cartel of the Suns. The name comes from the stars on the general's epaulettes and is used to describe all government officials involved in the drug trade. It is not really a cartel. It is more like the current incarnation of two decades of "often competing networks buried deep within the Chavista regime" (InSight Crime, 2018, p. 17). Cocaine used to run from Colombia through Venezuela and then out the Venezuela coast to the Dominican Republic or Honduras. Initially, the Venezuela Armed Forces turned a blind eye. Later on, they began to actively facilitate it (InSight Crime, 2018).

During the 1990's, the Armed Forces begin allow the ELN and the FARC safe refuge on the Venezuelan side of the border. These groups begin to develop close links to Venezuelan officials. Officials implicated in captured FARC documents include Ramon Rodriguez Chacin, the 2008 Minister of Justice and the Interior, code named "El Cojo", Hugo Armando Carvajal Barrios, Director of Military Intelligence, Henry Rangel Silva, Director of the Intelligence Police,

Freddy Bernal, a former mayor who facilitated the training of *colectivos* in explosives and urban warfare with the FARC, General Oliver Acala Cordones, intelligence officer Ramon Madriz Moreno, and General Fabio Zavarse Pabon, commander of the National Guard (InSight Crime, 2018).

The structure for the other illegal activities is located within Venezuela's artificially-controlled exchange rate. There are strict government currency controls. They offer access to the desirable rate of 10 bolivars to the dollar to some people, while restricting that rate to others, forcing them to pay the 3000:1 rate on the black market, which is still more desirable than the standard rate of about 8000:1. This beneficial rate is only offered to those seeking to buy imported food products. The importers then pocket the difference (Dreier & Goodman, 2016) Currently, Venezuela has heavy government control and intervention as well as economic policies that discourage entrepreneurship. They have a low respect for contracts. They practice "wanton expropriations" in addition to their politicized judiciary. The Heritage Foundation ranks Venezuela 174 out of 177 worldwide in the "Economic Freedom Index". (Cardenas, 2014).

According to Hannah Drier, one of Venezuela's most profitable gifts is to take advantage of the artificially-controlled exchange rate and the heavy subsidies on food and fuel. Food importers have access to this beneficial exchange rate. They use it to purchase imported food at standard market rate and then pocket what is left. Since the major international food exporters refuse to do business with Venezuela, the Venezuelan importers must then do business with companies that are historically linked to less-than-desirable business ethics and practices. This results in low-quality food being delivered to Venezuelan markets (Dreier & Goodman, 2016).



In addition to concerns about contamination and food spoiling before reaching its final destination, food insecurity is exacerbated because all food deliveries must go through the FANB before making it to the markets. In order to leave the ship, a bribe must be paid. To leave the port by truck, a fee must be paid, and then, after that, the food supplies are picked through by FANB soldiers who either take the food home to feed their families or use it to extort local merchants. Food that does not make it to the markets is then smuggled into Colombia where it can be sold for prices several times that which was paid in Venezuela (Dreier & Goodman, 2016).

Fuel subsidies have created a stratified black market for fuel that begins with the individual filling as many plastic containers as they can carry to full-size tankers being waved across the border by freshly-bribed FANB soldiers which change hands between the FANB, the FARC, the ELN, then down to smaller groups before being sold to Colombian retailers. Venezuelan fuel is very inexpensive when purchased in Venezuela. Once it is then brought into Colombia, it goes from 1/100 of a cent to between \$2-2.50 (El Pais, 2017). The ELN controls most of the fuel smuggling. The Tarra River becomes one of their prime transportation methods. Brazen smugglers pay no heed to concealing their activities and can often be easily seen hauling contraband from one side to the other (El Pais, 2017).

To combat fuel smuggling, Venezuela offers a chip that allows citizens to purchase a specific amount of fuel each day. Once that limit is reached, that individual must wait until the following day to purchase more fuel. This was intended to curb smuggling through restricting the amount of fuel sold, yet once the sun goes down, the pumps re-open for smugglers for only smuggler can afford the price of after-hours gas (El Pais, 2017).

## **CORRUPTION IN THE VENEZUELAN GOVERNMENT**

Before we discuss how Maduro has contributed to the Venezuelan decline, we must first step back and look at the Chavez regime and how it altered the social construction of Venezuela thus facilitating the integration of criminal elements into its structure. Chavez came to power in 1998 amidst financial and economic crises. He was a dynamic and controversial individual. His popularity was undeniable. However, much of that popularity was earned and maintained through public works programs supported by funds not generated by economic savvy, but from high oil prices. Had Chavez behaved as he did without the strength of oil exports, he might not have maintained the same level of support (Maya, 2014).

A case can be made that socialism is the cause of Venezuela's drastic economic downswing, however, Margarita Lopez Maya argues that Venezuela is not exactly a socialist country. It fits more into the model of being a *populist* country with overtones of rentier socialism. Maya says, "Although scholars have not yet reached a consensus about the nature of populism, the definition proposed by Ernesto Laclau (2005) describes it as a universal form of doing politics characterized by an aggressive and polarizing political discourse that divides society into 'the people' (the good, the poor, the powerless) and 'the oligarchy' (the bad, the elite, the powerful). Populist politics centers on a charismatic leader who establishes direct relationships with his followers, without mediation... Populism privileges the direct relationship between leader and masses above state institutions and laws, and it tends toward a polarizing, discrediting discourse that does not tolerate difference and pluralism" (Maya, 2014, p. 69).

However, she does go on to say that some aspects of Chavez' government do reflect aspects of

rentier socialism, a political framework that weakens private property and strengthens social property, therefore she allows that these two lenses create the theoretical contextualization upon which Chavismo was built.

According to Maya, there are four successful ways in which secured his popular following by connecting to the populace. He ran an almost permanent campaign. He developed a powerful media structure that he paid for with the state oil tax. This media structure had 5 TV channels, dozens of radio stations, websites and street propaganda. “Hello, President” was a show where Chavez could connect to the population. There was also a restriction on private media. He also constructed popular neighborhood organizational networks that connected directly to Chavez. By 2012, there were 40,000 of these organizations. If they supported Chavez, Chavez would support them. He also created 30 social missions. These operated parallel to the state and served to undermine resources and state effectiveness (Maya, 2014).

In 2007, he begins his second term amidst contentious election conditions. He begins to implement his new reforms regardless of their rejection by popular vote. They lacked checks-and-balances. They lacked representation. Organized crime begins to penetrate into the government and violence increases. He created a restructures constitutional reform comprised of 69 articles that he managed to pass by pressuring the Supreme Court of Justice (Maya, 2014).

By then end of 2010, the Communal State begins to emerge parallel to the CRBV and is legitimated by popular power. The communal state is a highly centralized system controlled by an executive branch. Decisions are made through commune counsels. It is structured from small groups called communes. Those communes are then attached to Socialist cities. These cities can then form federations and confederations. Big decisions are made in the assemblies

and then disseminated down into the communes through elected spokespeople. The communes are not autonomous (Maya, 2014).

Chavez, backed by Venezuela's massive oil reserves, had the ability to restructure Venezuela to fit his vision not because his policies worked, but because Venezuela had enough oil money to prop them up as they foundered. The level of nationalization and restructuring that occurred was able to happen solely because the price of oil was so high (Maya, 2014). As we will see, once oil prices plummet and the support system through which the success of Chavismo was predicated dissolves, what is left is an oligarchy whose participation in illicit trade has bankrupted a once-wealthy country and is using its infrastructure to continue to facilitate the movement of cocaine out of South American and up into US markets, in addition to a variety of other illegal activities.

To further increase corruption in the government, in 2005, Chavez forced out the DEA and trafficking increased. "Venezuela suddenly became a black hole for US intelligence gathering in the counter-narcotics fight." P.19 (InSight Crime, 2018). Since then, 123 individuals are involved/have been involved in criminal activities including the Vice President, Ministers of the Interior, Defense, Agriculture, Prisons, Foreign Trade and Investment, and Electricity, as well as the National Guard, The Armed Forces, and intelligence agency known as SEBIN. Diosdado Cabello, the second in command of the ruling party, is the focus of US investigations after a May 2014 *Wall Street Journal* article vilifies him as a criminal. The Vice President, Tarek Al Assimi, a name that will come up often in this story, has links to organized crime. Interior Minister Nestor Revorol has also been indicted in the US for drug trafficking. He is the former head of the National Guard and has a history of obstructing justice and investigations of drug

traffickers. Maduro promotes and supports criminals, giving them high-ranking positions in his government. He ties their success to the success of his regime (InSight Crime, 2018).

As this occurs, power in Venezuela becomes more centralized. Maduro wins the elections, but not without controversy. His party, however, failed to win congress and he is faced with an entrenched opposition. He attempts to win popular support but where Chavez was charismatic and likeable, Maduro is clumsy and corrupt and he fails to win over the people. Maduro surrounds himself with criminality and uses his position as president to participate and facilitate many criminal operations, so many that according to InSightCrime.org, a non-profit organization dedicated to journalistic scholarship regarding organized crime activities in the Americas, Venezuela is considered a mafia state. They state seven major reasons for this determination: (1) top level criminal penetration into state institutions, (2) Evidence of kleptocracy, (3) Devolution of state powers to irregular and illegal actors, (4) Exponential growth of Venezuelan organized crime, (5) High levels of violence by state and non-state actors, (6) The Exportation of Criminality (7) Widespread international accusations of criminality (InSight Crime, 2018, pp. 3-12). Effectively, the Venezuelan government and the military high command have drained Venezuela's coffers and are left with only the plentiful illegal and illicit opportunities through which they can continue to maintain a cash-flow (InSight Crime, 2018).

### **STREET CRIME IN VENEZUELA**

Criminality in Venezuela has bloomed in the recent decades since Chavez created the "ideological justification for tolerating criminality" (InSight Crime, 2018, p. 7). Historically,

Venezuela has had little organized crime. Much of it came from the Colombians. In 2013, Chavez created the Peace Zone Policy. Its goal was to increase social investment into high crime areas. The result found the mayor responsible for the program becoming indirectly involved with the gangs. Because of this, no state, municipal, or city security forces could enter these designated areas. Now possessing control over their territory, the gangs became stronger (InSight Crime, 2018).

In addition to the Cartel of the Suns and the high-level illegal operation with the government, the streets have become increasingly dangerous. But the foundations for that violence, again, stem from Chavez-era policies. Criminality on a local level has increased drastically under the Maduro administration. There are 89 homicides per 100,000 people annually. This makes them the most violent in Latin America. There were 26,616 homicides in 2017, 5,500 of them were by security forces, many during heavy-handed responses to protests. Comparatively, in 1999, when Chavez took power, the rate was 25 per 100,000, and only 6,000 violent deaths *total* in 1999. Venezuela's "free elections" are quite suspect. (InSight Crime, 2018).

Chavez barely survived a coup in 2002. When he did, not only did he increase the amount of FANB members in the administration, but he began to create groups known as *Los Colectivos*. As a result of his fears of instability, he begins to develop parallel state structures. "The Bolivarian Circles," as they were initially named, were created in 2001 to show their worth as 'footsoldiers of Chavismo' and, by 2006, are receiving weapons as well as state funding (InSight Crime, 2018).

*Los Colectivos* are armed civilian groups that provide some public services but are often heavily involved in criminal activity. They were directly tied to Chavismo, operating as a bastion against potential coups. After his death, they remain active yet mostly reject Maduro as being a worthy successor. They have control over particular neighborhoods. They operate with the government's blessing. They are semi-legitimate, and they essentially answer to no one. They operate a "parallel justice system." They are used by the government as enforcers to control local populations as well as assistants in repressing opposition protesters. They are often funded through extortion, gambling, prostitution, and the drug and weapons trade. (InSight Crime, 2018).

A higher level of criminal organization is a direct result of prison reforms that concentrated power into the hands of powerful *pranes*. The *Pranes* are prison kingpins whose influence, as a result of reformatory policies in Venezuelan prison policy, has extended past the prison walls and out into the world itself. Through proxies called *trenes*, they control neighborhoods, weapons, drugs, and illegal mining activities. They associate with criminal gangs known as *Megabandas*. These groups participate in extortion, kidnapping, drugs, theft, and grand theft auto. In Venezuela, there are 12-16 active Megabandas, some with over 300 members (InSight Crime, 2018).

When Maduro came into power in 2014, he had to surmount a variety of institutional obstacles created when Chavez-era policies established the economic conditions that would facilitate the on-coming collapse. He faced infrastructure breakdowns, electricity shortages, scarcity of basic items, rampant inflation, declining production, over-valued currency, rampant street crime, the falling production of oil and oil revenues, the loss of international reserves, an

inflation rate at 55%, \$85 billion in national debt (about 70% of their GDP), and a highly problematic currency exchange policy (Cardenas, 2014). Dependence on oil exports to furnish food and supply imports left business owners without the capital to afford imported supplies nor to have access to a national production economy that could make them domestically (Cardenas, 2014). Combine this with the rampant criminality within the government and the armed forces, add staggering hyperinflation, lack of access to medicine, lack of access to food, and the conditions for creating the rationale amongst the population that a better life could exist elsewhere begin to manifest.

### **SHADOW ECONOMIES: AN ANALYSIS**

Let us now bring this back around to our conversation regarding shadow economies. Remembering that Carolyn Nordstrom anchors her explication of shadow economy in her work with rebel fighters in Angola in the 1990's, she observes that although they are isolated from state markets, they still manage to acquire highly-sophisticated weaponry and communications technology. To determine how they acquire that equipment, Nordstrom conceptualizes transnational linkages represent a stratification of interaction that exists on a local scale, on an international scale, and everything in between. Taking into consideration the analytical limitations on charting extra-legal activities, she cites five criteria through which shadow economies can be analyzed. I will use this framework to illustrate the ways in which the actors described above interact to create a shadow economy that exists on the Colombia-Venezuela border.



*1. Profitable trade in illicit and dangerous goods is intricately tied to informal trade.*

Weaving through the border is a complex network of up to 200 illegal trails called *trochas*. These trails have been created for reasons such as maintaining transnational communities for the indigenous groups who live in the border areas to providing passageways for Venezuelan and Colombian citizens to access favorable fluctuations in exchange rates as well as food and medicine. The regular usage of these paths by licit groups keeps them open and functioning. As the Venezuelan economic situation continues to deteriorate, and illegal groups expand their opportunities for income generation, these paths offer methods of transportation for the myriad goods smuggled from Venezuela by average citizens looking for ways to earn money. It also appears that the ways these paths are used by guerillas and drug traffickers and the ways in which regular citizens can make capitalize on those opportunities are almost common knowledge. Additionally, the interconnections between individuals looking for work in border towns and the labor requirements of the illegal organizations often can find mutually beneficial arrangements. Illegal groups are more than willing to recruit day-laborers, smugglers, prostitutes, transporters, packers, pickers, trimmers, processors, and runners, to name a few. These individuals on the local level are responsible for providing the oil that drives the engine of shadow economies. Without the local assistance, these networks would find increased operational difficulties.

*2. Clear distinctions between legal and illegal, state and non-state, or local and international are often impossible to make.*

In both of these countries, this criteria is overwhelmingly evident. For Colombia, the blurred lines between legal and illegal, state and non-state can be best observed in the paramilitary practices and the privatization of violence. Through the Convivir program, the Colombian government established a counterinsurgency program that is linked to the state and elite interests, thus maintaining the status quo in a way that vacillates from sanctioned police actions to terrorism. Additionally, their connections to narcotics trafficking highlights the ways in which corporate interests, state power, violence, and illicit trade come together. The ways in which these groups obtain weaponry also vacillates from state pathways to their interactions with drug and weapons traffickers. However, Uribe's peace agreement that solidified the AUC demobilization effectively sealed the AUC record books regarding their business dealings so these element may never be truly revealed. His links to Convivir and the development of private security in Colombia further exemplifies the interconnections mentioned above.

To bring this to the local/international relationship, US intervention in Colombian affairs has been endemic to Colombian politics since the US assisted Panama is seceding in 1903. Since then, US presence has been a constant specter overseeing Colombia's relationships to itself as well as the external regional and international community. What operates as a Colombian policy and what operates as a US satellite policy blur the lines between Colombian internal politics and their strategic linking to international networks.

On the Venezuelan side, all of these factors come together in the analysis of the Venezuelan government, including the military. The participation of all of these actors in not only licit and illicit trade but the ways in which licit trade can be manipulated to produce semi-

legal, ethically-ambiguous grey markets, entirely negates conceptions of binaries amongst analysis of Venezuelan legality.

3. *Illicit and extra-state trade is, ironically, linked to development.*

Nordstrom says, “As dangerous and illegal as drug and illicit weapons trade may be it is often the means by which citizens can gain the currency to buy industrial necessities, agricultural supplies, and development goods. Such illicit goods purchase hard currency, they broker power, they allow investments into land, legal industries and political partnerships” (Nordstrom, 2000, p. 43). This is echoed by Duffield as well in his analysis of the social structures that develop shadow economies. It should be noted here, however, that Nordstrom locates her research in central Africa. Development in central Africa is different than development in South America. They have many similar characteristics, both when viewed from a colonial and a neoliberal perspective. However, post-colonially, they differ. Without diving into a history of decolonization, I will drastically over-simplify the situation to: decolonization in central Africa is imbued with different *dispositifs* of the colonial era than decolonization in Colombia and Venezuela. In addition, the processes and ideologies of colonization were different (see: Williams 2010; Hall 1992; Rodney 1972).

Neo-liberal development and Cold War and post-Cold War politics, on the other hand, has a combined impact on both central Africa and Colombia/Venezuela but let us turn our attention to how it affects latter. US territorial ambitions beginning at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century paint the picture for US intervention into South America. Support of the Colombian status quo against communism in the 1950’s and 1960’s turned into aid for the War on Drugs

that blended with further anti-communist counterinsurgency defined by a consistent increase in violence. The violence between the Colombian elites that has existed in Colombia since its inception is related to the relationships between Colombian elites and transnational business interests. As exemplified in the period from the War of One Thousand Days through *La Violencia* to Plan Colombia to today, violence in Colombia is defined by urban elites consolidating power by taking land and resources and dividing them amongst foreign actors. Internal conflict stems from the reaction in the peasantry to repressive and exploitative state practices. Illicit trade, especially in weapons and narcotics, provides currency to exchange for goods and equipment, both for guerillas and peasant farmers. These states that promote exploitative practices are often linked to international corporations. These corporations, as exemplified by Grajales in his explication of the links between agribusiness and Colombian paramilitarism (Grajales, 2017), operate in a relationship with the state that promotes their own interests over national interests in a way that aligns with current neoliberal practices. Thus, through the restrictive practices of neoliberal organizations, internal conflict and displacement leading to the need for the creation of alternative markets to satisfy both revolutionary ambitions and to establish a means through which isolated communities, negated, invisibilized, or exploited, could access market products.

#### *4. Illicit transaction and development link with political power*

“Business people who profit from shadow transactions are unlikely to give up shadow sources of power, profit and supply as they develop legitimate enterprise, and in fact, their success may depend on keeping these networks current,” says Nordstrom (Nordstrom, 2000, p. 43). This is evidenced across the board in this circumstance. In Colombia, there are countless

instances of government officials being linked with traffickers, paramilitaries, guerillas, and the FANB. Politicians received donations from the cartels in the 1980's. Wealthy landowners hired private security firms who would then participate in semi-government sanctioned counterinsurgency operations, sometimes with excessive enthusiasm. These landowners would then, down the road, run for office. They get elected and they bring all of their old friends with them, so to speak. In Venezuela, the penetration of the Cartel of the Sun not only into the military and the government but, through their control of the oil and food production, have positioned themselves to make key legislative decisions, often in ways that benefit them. The Panamanian Government considers 54 Venezuelan government figures, including Maduro, to be "high risk" for money laundering and financial terrorism. The European Union has sanctions on 7 senior Venezuelan officials. Interior Minister Nestor Revorol has been indicted in the US for drug trafficking. He is the former head of the National Guard and has a history of obstructing justice and investigations of drug traffickers. According to InsightCrime, "The penetration of so many key institutions, and the fact that they constitute the state's main organs in the fight against organized crime, means that Venezuela cannot even contain organized crime, let alone effectively fight it" (InSight Crime, 2018, p. 4).

##### *5. The junctures of licit/illicit economy shape formal global markets*

Nordstrom states, "It is important to remember that all the goods that enter countries outside formal state channels constitute profits for legitimate businesses in industrial centers in the world.... This vast set of global shadow exchanges affects global pricing, stock markets, interest rates and exchange rates (Nordstrom, 2000, p. 44)." As evidenced by Colombian agriculture, both legal and illegal, and Venezuelan oil and food markets, the shadow economy

that exists between these two countries is enmeshed with international finance in a way supports Nordstrom's claim regarding the interconnectedness of licit and illicit markets. Additionally, although Venezuela has sanctions placed upon it by the US, UK, and EU, it still manages to find both corporations and countries with which to do business. Oil and agricultural land are still lucrative commodities. Historically, transnational business is interested in maintaining unstable states in countries with these resources.

As is outlined above, a complex shadow economy exists in the borderlands between Colombia and Venezuela. This shadow economy is a product of Duffield's process of self-reliance. The lack of state reach isolates those who live in the borderlands. As a result of this, they must develop networks through which resources can be acquired. Drug and weapons trafficking, food and fuel smuggling, currency exchange, and the trade in counterfeit and stolen medication provide powerful economic possibilities for people in need of basic necessities. These networks are not just ruthless criminals vying for power and domination. Shadow economies also reflect the day-to-day ways through which the average citizen, isolated and restricted from state services, puts a roof over their head, food on their table, and clothes on their back. As exemplified by the migration into Colombia, Venezuelans have created sophisticated systems of self-reliance that capitalize on the border. This allows them to cross it and to utilize it economically. Coupled with the on-going struggle to control illicit trade along the border, the migration has, as exemplified by Duffield, created the conditions where humanitarianism-as-counterinsurgency could operate as a viable, neoliberal solution that would a) control and contain a migration event and, b) help to stifle political violence. It should be noted also that this is an ongoing situation and the implications that the destabilization of

Venezuela has for US foreign policy are multifaceted to say the least, therefore containment and counterinsurgency may not be the only opportunities catching the neoliberal eye at the moment.

## **CONCLUSION**

The elements discussed above serve to paint a picture of the shadow economy that exists on the Colombia-Venezuela border and how it connects to the Venezuelan government in a way that incentivizes the current destructive policies of the Maduro administration, as well as anchors us in the political ideology of the nation causing the movement of people. Taken together, crisis narratives, the global war on the poor, and shadow economies illustrate the discursive movements that international organizations make to restrict the movement of non-insured life as well as to undermine these powerful shadow economies that transcend many conceptions of politics, economics, and sociology.

Seen in this context, crisis narratives gain grant funding, they motivate investment and donation, they legitimize historical perspectives, and they facilitate the promotion of organizational agendas. Simultaneously, they focus attention on neoliberalism and its humanitarian apparatus as the appropriate solution. As we have seen above, that apparatus serves as an extension of the politics of containment and is a powerful tool for counterinsurgency. It serves to undermine involvement in the shadow economy by replacing self-reliance with international aid. The neoliberal movement would prefer that the poor be dependent upon regime services as opposed to shadow economics. To briefly summarize, crisis

narrative provides the discursive movements needed to legitimize humanitarian intervention in a part of the world that has been, historically, left to its own devices. That international neglect has created a shadow economy that is strong enough to provide outlets for migrant populations on both sides of the border. I argue that the move for crisis narratives and humanitarian intervention in an event that is on a smaller scale than other “crises” could be indicative of a neoliberal movement to capitalize on the containment of an area that has been resistant to international interests. In saying this, I acknowledge the significant complexity of this event and the fact that my analysis here could be one of many angles of approach. However, the purpose here is not to make bold statements about what is and what is not happening, the purpose is to raise awareness that this issue is not a cut-and-dry as the media and the institutions would have you believe. This is not necessarily an issue of tyrants, oil, socialism, and questionable US foreign policy practices. When seen through the lens of crisis, shadow economy, and global civil war, a much more complicated picture emerges. This picture incorporates colonization, de-colonization, inappropriate US intervention, the Cold War, the Drug War, and the impact of transnational corporate interests to discuss what happens to countries that are exploited so that mass consumer society can continue to consume past its means.

President Maduro’s administration not alone in bearing the responsibility for the migration events. They are aided by structures from the Chavez-era as well as connections made between them and Colombian guerilla, paramilitary, and drug trafficking groups. These connections are then facilitated by their linkages to these transnational shadow economies that keep money and products flowing in and out of the country. This ‘crisis’ may not about



socialism or tyranny. It may be about the fact that a giant spotlight, in the form of a mass migration, has just been pointed on a part of the world where the binaries of licit and illicit, state and non-state, legal and illegal dissolve into a spectrum of configurations in a place and a time where, if they are not careful, they can be observed in a way that allows for investigation. Crisis narratives allows discursive control as well as promotion for humanitarian aid. Aid operates as a neoliberal apparatus of 'civilian counterinsurgency' to re-establish policies of containment and de-legitimize political violence to further insulate insured life. This harkens back to Duffield and his observations of New War and the changes in international apparatus to snuff out insurrection and control populations.

Although humanitarian intervention is warranted in order to give vulnerable people access to necessities, it is not a long-term solution. To make it into a long-term solution turns it into a self-perpetuating organization that will produce the conditions it seeks to assuage. I argue that both increasing and reducing sanctions and economic pressure will remain ineffective as well. Addressing this issue effectively means asking questions about ourselves and our relationship with neoliberal ideology. Even if somehow the Maduro administration came back in line with neoliberal practices, what is likely to happen is that the system of repression and containment will continue. The West has an idea about how history is supposed to be. That idea is conveyed through the media and academia to the population, incentivized by institutions through academic credibility and journalistic praise, to support the aid organizations who then perform as the apparatus through which the West maintains its containment of the life through which it has extracted its own. With this idea in mind, is it not more effective to lean towards introspection as opposed to being reactionary? Perhaps if we

want to help Colombia and Venezuela achieve the stability that allows them to care for their people, food and water is, of course, a great place to start, but after that, taking the time to look at our own society and ask ourselves why, regardless of decades of development and countless billions of dollars of aid circulating, has the gap between the rich and the poor has *increased* - and is *still increasing*?

An important lesson to take from Roitman is this:

*"The point is to take note of the effects of the claim to crisis, and to take note of the effects of our very accession to that judgment.* The forms of critique engendered by crisis serve to politicize interest groups for a critique of capitalism. This is a politics of crisis. Moving beyond this point of crisis, one might insist that effective forms of critique would instead engender new forms of knowledge such that, for instance, the very boundary between 'the economic' and 'the political' would be reorganized or transformed. But this has not obtained. The crisis of the subject- be it neoliberal or indebted capitalist- entails an epistemological crisis that could only be apprehended through the cognizance of a transformation in the rules for making meaningful statements" (Roitman, 2014, p. 69).

In other words, we could stand to reconceptualize our relationship to crisis and not define ourselves as living in a point in history but as being a part of a continuum: a flexible, fluctuating space that ebbs, flows, and adjusts to internal and external stimuli. We might also do well to maintain the understanding that the use of the term crisis means that someone is trying to sell

you something. Unless this individual narrator is somehow situated in a position located outside of time, and outside of history, where they, in their omnipresent and singular vision, are capable of determining good from evil, right from wrong, and truth from non-truth, they lack the perspective required to make such a claim. Therefore, in closing, conceptions of the Colombia-Venezuela 'crisis,' as such, imply the promotion of viewpoints that promote neoliberal solutions to neoliberal problems and perpetuate the cycle of asymmetrical binaries from which they are claiming that the acts of Western paternalistic generosity will lead to a harmonious balance of imbalance. I suggest that we not take this discourse at face value because, as evidenced above, this story goes beyond what is broadcast.

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